



Remembering Radcliffe

Citation

Park, Katharine. 2004. Remembering Radcliffe. In Yards and gates: gender in Harvard and Radcliffe history, edited by Laurel Ulrich, 293-298. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Permanent link

<http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:4677611>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

Remembering Radcliffe

Katharine Park

My class--the class of 1972--was one of the last to graduate before many of the important changes that marked the relationship between Harvard and Radcliffe in that decade, including the abolition of the famous four-to-one ratio of male to female undergraduates and the Agreement of 1977. What was Radcliffe before that year? Working from hindsight, including 17 years spent teaching at Wellesley, I can most easily characterize what it was not. It was not a women's college, in any sense that alumnae of Wellesley, Smith, Bryn Mawr, or Mount Holyoke would understand. It was not a community of women. In fact, as I remember it, it was not a community at all. I had no sense of being a member of a college; my community was, most immediately and strongly, the inhabitants of my dorm, Comstock, and then, more dilutely, of my House, North House (now Pforzheimer). I doubt if I was friends with more than a handful of women from other Radcliffe Houses; I believe I once set foot in one of the dorms in South House. I am quite sure I never entered any of the Cabot dorms at all. I could not then have named any but the dorms in my own House, though by the time I graduated I knew (and had spent time in) every Harvard House and could describe in detail their particular characters and reputations. Radcliffe, in contrast, had for me no identity of its own and no sense of unity that such an identity might anchor. It was in every sense, as it had begun, the Annex--a place to eat, to study (it had a lovely library), to hang out with my dorm mates, and to sleep, but not a focus of what I then viewed as important: political activism, cultural events, intellectual life, social and sexual exploration, the last of which I saw in completely heterosexual terms. All of those were located at Harvard, in the Yard, the Houses, and the Square.

The reasons for Radcliffe's invisibility to me were, I think, partly internal and partly institutional. Internal, in that, like most of the women I knew, I came from a public high school that sent students to Radcliffe with great infrequency, so I didn't arrive knowing other students in the College; I constructed my own community out of my dorm mates, the women I saw every day. More than that, however, I was completely male-identified. I think this was fairly common for a girl of my race (white) and class (upper middle/professional), growing up in the late 1950s and 1960s, before second-wave feminism had made appreciable inroads into American culture. My father was a high-achieving physicist, my mother (class of 1944) a highly gifted and profoundly dissatisfied caretaker of four children who taught part-time at a local community college--no role model for the shape of a female life there. Virtually all of my high school teachers were male. Though my best friends were all girls, real social life, in my high school, was by definition heterosexual. So I wasn't prepared to appreciate, or even to see, a community of women, particularly one so dilute and ambiguously constituted as Radcliffe, devoid of a curriculum or a faculty, and overshadowed in every respect by its bigger, richer, more fascinating brother.

There were many institutional factors that played into my own insensitivity to the possibilities of female community at Radcliffe. The focus on heterosocial and heterosexual interaction was reinforced by numerous Radcliffe practices, in which we were all complicit. Take, for example, the tradition of Saturday night milk and cookies dished out by Mrs. Perry (wife of the North House master) in the Comstock living room. The message was clear: if you didn't have a date on Saturday, you stayed in, and this was

a consolation prize. The message was made even clearer by the fact that we were encouraged to come down in our pajamas and bathrobes to hear Master Perry read a bedtime story. (I don't think any of us thought that dateless Harvard men were spending Saturday evening in the same way.) Aside from Mrs. Perry, I do not remember meeting a single adult woman associated with Radcliffe--by adult, I mean a woman who was not some kind of student--except for the food service workers in the dining room and kitchen. I have no idea what Mrs. Perry did with the rest of her time; she may have been a remarkable woman, of great energy and accomplishment. But, except for one or two ceremonial occasions, I do not believe I ever saw her (or any other female adult at Radcliffe) doing anything but serving food. I don't remember if my house had faculty associates; in any case, none were likely to have been women, given the constitution of the faculty at that time. I do not remember meeting a Radcliffe administrator of any description, which now strikes me as remarkable. This remarkable dearth of any women who might have served as plausible role models for an intellectually and professionally ambitious woman--and I was both--may explain the enormous impact on me of my only 2 female professors in 12 years of higher education, Joan Cadden and Caroline Walker Bynum (assistant professors in the History of Science and History Departments respectively, without any prospect of tenure), whose fields of medieval intellectual and religious history ultimately became my own. But they belonged to Harvard, not to Radcliffe.

Unlike the students I later taught at Wellesley, I do not remember having any sense of pride in Radcliffe as a college. Indeed, as I have already indicated, I didn't

really think of it as a college at all. I remember being proud of having been admitted to Radcliffe, when I was still in high school, but it was hard to retain that sense of pride in the face of what I can only describe as an unrelenting rain of contemptuous messages from Harvard faculty, administrators, and students about those they called Cliffies. I still can't hear that word without flinching; it was inevitably part of some piece of mindless vituperation. Whenever my Fine Arts 13 professor put up a slide of a painting that showed a particularly ugly woman, he would say, "There's another Cliffie." I remember Skiddy von Stade, the dean of freshmen, protesting any change in the four-to-one male to female undergraduate ratio, on the grounds that the education of women, who couldn't be expected to use it, was basically thrown away. My tutors used the phrase "like most Cliffies" a fair amount. I was told that "like most Cliffies," my work was highly competent but not creative. My senior year, after I had won a Marshall Scholarship for graduate study in England, the head tutor of my concentration, History and Literature, called me in for a special meeting to warn me against delusions of grandeur--in this case, planning on a graduate education. Like most Cliffies, he said, you're still riding on your laurels from high school.

Being hit on by tutors and teaching fellows--we had no word, or even a mental category, for what later came to be called sexual harassment--was an ongoing fact of life. Comments about "Cliffie bitches" were too numerous even to notice--fallout in part from that dreadful four-to-one ratio and from the general stigma attached in that period to smart, intellectual women. I don't think any of us really believed the awful things Harvard men said about us, but it made it hard for me to take much joy in the abstract fact

of being a Radcliffe student. In this connection, I remember the utter shock of seeing *Love Story*, released in 1970, which portrayed a Radcliffe student as a romantic heroine (even if she did die in the end).

The spring of 1970 brought changes far more significant than the release of *Love Story*, however: the bombing of Cambodia, the cancellation of classes and finals in the wake of protests, riots and tear gas in the Square. A quieter revolution was happening at Radcliffe, with the beginning of coresidence, when 40 women from the three Radcliffe Houses moved into three of the Harvard Houses (Winthrop, Adams, and Lowell), and 40 men from those Harvard Houses moved up Garden Street to take their places. For me, things got worse rather than better, because I chose to be one of the first 40 North House students to move into Winthrop. Wasn't Harvard where the action was? This turned out to be a mistake. Other Radcliffe students had better experiences, and the situation in Adams was reportedly very good. For me, however, Winthrop was a nightmare. Many of its students had opposed coresidence--some had even been moved out of their suites to accommodate the arriving Radcliffe students--and the hostility was particularly palpable in my entry, where our entry mates used to urinate against our door.

I won't dwell on this unhappy experience, because I want to emphasize instead the effects of coresidence at Radcliffe, which--when I returned next fall--had undergone what I remember as a remarkable transformation. Arriving back at North House was in some respects disconcerting. Even to my less than embryonic feminist consciousness, it was surprising to find that students of the House, still overwhelmingly female, had elected an all-male slate of student officers, from the president right down to the fire

marshal. But House officers were seen as pretty much a joke anyway, particularly in the context of the national political firestorm of spring and summer 1970. The most amazing long-term change in my House--and I'm sure each House differed--was a dramatic sense of relaxation. We (the women residents) worked less, stressed less over our courses, and had more fun. A lot of really weird behaviors around food and eating--lining up in front of the dining room door at 4:45 p.m., eating only a mini-can of tuna fish at dinner and then gorging on a dozen doughnuts--most of that either stopped or went underground.

I'm still not quite sure why the presence of men made such a difference. Partly, I think I was very lucky; I was by then living in Wolbach, and the men and women there got along extremely well. The bonding took place both around forms of mild social rowdiness and around more serious, political things as well; most of the men in my dorm were seniors and many faced the draft in a war that virtually all of us abhorred. Partly it was because their presence validated Radcliffe; amazingly, a small number of men considered the place interesting enough to move there voluntarily. This made it seem less of a ghetto, despite its pitifully inadequate housing and its distance from the Square. Mostly, however, I think it was the particular men who had initially chosen to come to Radcliffe. They were, on the whole, men who actually *liked* women--who enjoyed our company, appreciated our intelligence, and found us interesting and funny (which we were). This was presumably why they decided to join us in the first place. I'm sure there were lots of men who liked women both on the faculty and among Harvard students in 1970, but I doubt if they were in the majority, and their voices were in any case lost in the much louder cacophony of generalized institutional and personal misogyny.

For me, at least--and this is not something I'm particularly proud of--the fact that these men liked me and my dorm mates made me begin to realize how much I liked us as well. So much so, in fact, that at the end of my junior year, in the summer of 1971, I moved down Walker Street into 60 Walker, a small frame building that was still part of North House, and its last remaining all-female dorm. Thus I spent much of 1971-72 as part of a surrogate family of irreverent Radcliffe women, presided over by a marvelous dorm resident (a graduate student), whom we called Mothah and who was about as different from Mrs. Perry as it was possible to be. That was, I think, my first conscious appreciation of the joys of female community--an appreciation that truly flowered only much later, during my years teaching at Wellesley. That, then, was *my* Radcliffe in the early 1970s: no Adamless Eden, to be sure, but at least no longer a no-man's land, in a larger institution where man was still without question the measure of all things.